



# Six Lessons in Regionalism

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**Regional collaboration can yield big payoffs, but requires a thoughtful approach. Take these six steps toward stronger collaborations.**

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Regional collaboration is notoriously difficult.

After all, “the region is nobody’s community.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet, despite this fact, many community leaders are realizing that they will not unlock their community’s potential unless the conditions in the region around them also improve.

As a university center uninhibited by local political boundaries, the Center for Rural Engagement sows seeds for regional collaboration by hosting regional events like the [IU Rural Conference](#)<sup>2</sup>, launching initiatives that impact multiple counties, and connecting community members who are working on similar issues in different places. We also work closely with several organizations with a regional and statewide focus. This has given us a unique vantage point from which to distill lessons about successful regional collaboration. These are the six lessons I’ve learned about successful regional collaboration.

## 1 Cooperation is the first step

Trust is fundamental to any collaboration and is often more difficult to build when community leaders lack a clear mandate to work outside their traditional territory and may be inhibited by historical rivalries. Psychology research has found that frequent interactions between people create goodwill and lead to higher levels of trust. [Strategic Doing](#)<sup>3</sup>, a popular collaboration discipline developed at Purdue University and implemented by the Center for Rural Engagement, is built around the idea of starting by launching small, achievable projects as a means for building trust.

The Center for Rural Engagement uses [student consulting projects](#)<sup>4</sup> as an “agile” way to kick off new engagements with partners – the students bring creative ideas and energy to the client, and the center gets to know the organization without requiring a large time investment on the organization’s part. The lesson here is that cooperation can be a precursor to deeper collaboration. Start small and find ways to create repeated interactions.



## 2 Capitalize on momentum

If there is a cross-cutting issue that is affecting the entire region – capitalize on it. People are more likely to be willing to collaborate if they are already invested in an issue and can benefit from help from their neighbors. Asking community members to both tackle a new issue and work with new people is often too much and will set the group up for failure.

## 3 Be intentional about networks

Carefully curating the network of individuals and organizations who will participate is an important early step. Involve those with vision, diverse networks, and the ability to persuade others to support the collaboration. Avoid pessimists and those who lack follow-through or struggle to see the big picture.

## 4 Optimize information flow

Regular communication is critical – networks only stay together if information flows through them. Leaders of regional collaborations should plan to overcommunicate updates to the group. In her book, *The Chessboard and the Web*, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the CEO of the New America Foundation, notes that in order to facilitate international diplomacy – a truly difficult exercise in collaborating across political boundaries – leaders hold frequent events, which allows information to flow and creates environments where relationships can flourish.

*“The hope is that one-time or annual meetings will spur attendees to action and will generate networks by fostering useful connections.”*

*Anne-Marie Slaughter,  
The Chessboard and the Web*

## 5 Be disciplined about messaging and execution

Because regionalism is hard, disciplined messaging and follow-through is essential. The NSWC Crane leadership has demonstrated this through an initiative that they call “the Regional Embrace.” They have relentlessly messaged the importance of regional partnerships. Their approach reminds me of LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner’s adage, “when you are tired of saying it, people are starting to hear it.” Importantly, they have also followed up on their talk by allocating resources to demonstrate their commitment.

## 6 Remember Bob Yaro’s Three T’s and Three P’s

One of the members of our center’s board of advisors, Bob Yaro, formerly ran the Regional Plan Association (RPA) in New York, a national exemplar of successful regional planning. Bob – [who was once described as an “oracle”](#)<sup>5</sup> by the Wall Street Journal – offers practical and easy-to-remember advice to anyone aspiring to engage in regional collaboration – his Three T’s: “Things Take Time” and Three P’s: Persistence, Patience, and Perseverance.”

### References

<sup>1</sup>Bruce Katz, *Reflections on Regionalism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iub-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3004371>; <sup>2</sup>“Indiana University Rural Conference,” Center for Rural Engagement, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://rural.indiana.edu/events/2020-rural-conference.html>; <sup>3</sup>“Agile Strategy Lab Network,” Agile Strategy Lab Network, April 2, 2020, <https://agilestrategylab.org/solution/strategicdoing/>; <sup>4</sup>“Sustaining Hoosier Communities,” Center for Rural Engagement, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://rural.indiana.edu/impact/shc/index.html>; <sup>5</sup>Laura Kusisto, “Planning ‘Oracle’ Robert Yaro to Retire from Regional Group,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, August 7, 2014), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/planning-oracle-robert-yaro-to-retire-from-regional-group-1407372180>